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ABSTRACT

Counselors working with black ghetto populations must consider the geography, moral values, and commonality of interests of the community. The counselor is primarily concerned with the deployment of community resources and, when resources are scarce, the counselor must become an advocate. Counselors striving to change the blacks' perceptions of institutional services as inaccessible must determine what conditions impede service delivery and what institutional elements are perceived by blacks as threatening. In terms of their social order, black ghettos are moral communities. Counselors must discern the moral order of the ghetto and its supportive values and institutions, and must appreciate the significance of those factors to ghetto residents. Rejected by the larger society, lower-class blacks construct an identity and obtain status and self-esteem within their own ghetto communities. Counselors must understand this notion and recognize the forces which operate to discourage work and encourage welfare among the black lower class. If counselors are to effectively attack social problems, they must view the black poor not in psychiatric terms, but in terms of the social and structural constraints which are the true locus of their failure. (NRB)

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# THE COUNSELOR'S ROLE IN THE BLACK GHETTO:

# NEGLECTED ASPECTS OF COMMUNITY

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THE COUNSELOR'S ROLE IN THE BLACK GHETTO:

NEGLECTED ASPECTS OF COMMUNITY

COMMUNITY AS PLACE

In the treatment of Black ghetto populations, counselors have traditionally viewed community within the narrow frame of a delimited geographical area. This viewpoint eventuates in the neglect of two other important dimensions of community; namely, community as an institutionalized system of values or moral community and community as a commonality of interests.

In the first instance, the counselor's concern has been with the efficient deployment of the community's resources to confront the problems which afflict the Black underclass. The main focus is on allocation and the mechanisms and structures for the delivery of services. The emphasis of the counselor is primarily on coordination and the construction of interagency linkages. The proper execution of this function requires a working knowledge of the institutional matrix of the community, particularly welfare service institutions. The major difficulties arise when there is an absence or scarcity of resources and services or where these exist, the Black poor perceive them as inaccessible.

In a situation where resources are scarce, limited or unavailable, the counselor's role is clearly that of an advocate.

The counselor should utilize the full complex of informational strategies in educating the public to the parameters of the problem. Arguments which are couched in realistic terms of future advantages to the general public enjoy a better climate of receptivity than those phrased in the language of appeals to conscience. The former strategy enhances the possibility of raising the level of public support while preventing the erosion of existing resource bases. Similar arguments could be advanced to individuals and organizations who control specific institutional sectors in terms of laws and public policy. Social policy changes could also be advocated through the agency structure. Advocacy is often misperceived as a radical style that is beyond the pale of the normal role requirements of the counselor. However, the advocacy perspective signals a more aggressive pursuit of remediation. The successful counselor cannot focus on a narrow formalism and ignore the real plight of his Black clients. Furthermore, prudent risk taking is an essential element of the human services.

The peculiarities of the problem being addressed should determine the selection of strategies. However, it is essential that Blacks, whose lives are ultimately affected by the outcome of these approaches, be intimately involved in problem definition, selection of approaches to solution and actual strategy implementation and appraisal. In pursuit of these mutually agreed upon objectives, coalitions can be formed with existing organizations and grass roots movements.[1] Such alliances between an agency and lower-class Blacks not only enhance the agency's standing in the

community but also aid participating Blacks in developing organizational and problem solving skills which may be generalizable to a wide range of tasks within the community's agenda. Smith[2] has stated that individual initiative in coping with urban injustices usually fails and increases frustration and tension; Smith also believes that to successfully confront and remedy bureaucratic inequities, a strategy of collective social action is required. Even a modicum of success in personally directed change will result in a more developed sense of personal and social efficacy on the part of the lower-class Black in which he realizes that he has the capabilities of exercising a measure of control over the forces that shape his environment and his future.[3] Those objectives that address themselves to immediate survival needs are easier of realization than those aimed at long term structural reforms because the differential vulnerability of the underclass to official sanctions make long range goals discouraging prospects.

The second problem, the Black client's perception of the institution's goods and services as inaccessible, is much more obdurate and resistant to change. The image of institutions held by Blacks is essentially condemnatory. The workings of institutions are viewed as inimical to their interest, even punitive. The persistence of this image, even in the face of disconfirming factors, is due to the fact that it has been shaped by a variety of negative experiences, from their custodial public school relationships to the daily traumatic indignities to which Black lower-class persons are subjected by many welfare

service agencies. It seems fair to assume that Blacks are responding normally in their negative perception of institutions, since a significant fraction of their total experience with institutions are negative encounters. This hostility and suspicion is part of the lower-class Black's cognitive defense against the pain of anxiety and rejection as he confronts bureaucratic indifference and a sometimes hostile society. According to Herbert Gans these attitudes reflect a "culture of alienation"[4] which has its own supports in conditions of deprivation and is relatively autonomous from the values and conventions of middle class society.

An increasing proportion of this difficulty can be traced to the operating assumption of many counselors that failure in one area, especially the area of material acquisition, is presumptive evidence of failure in other areas of life. Unfortunately, even the well-meaning counselor seizes this as a warrant to invade the private world of the Black client. One outcome of this assumption of incompetence is to force the Black poor into stable bargaining relationships with a web of welfare service agencies. Another aspect of the problem is that few counselors feel sufficiently secure to step out of their official role requirements and personally confront a problem with a Black client. Official jargon and intellectual posturing create artificial barriers between counselor and client; as a consequence, the mutuality which exists between two persons discussing an issue is absent and counseling contexts are transformed into power relationships in which lower-class Blacks are continually being confirmed in disesteemed statuses.[5]

This disaffection and generalized alienation from the institutional matrix of the larger society creates difficulties in ascertaining the objective basis for the perception of inaccessibility. Nevertheless, following W. I. Thomas' dictum that if individuals define situations as real, they are real in their consequences, the counselor must perforce grant an initial plausibility to the client's contention, but he cannot proceed wholly from this assumption. He should attempt to determine what conditions and/or policies, if any, are impeding the delivery of services and what institutional elements are perceived by Blacks as threatening. This information should be converted into feedback mechanisms which will generate more open attitudes on the part of the agency's personnel and serve as a guide for the reformulation of policies. Whatever the limitations, a serious attempt must be made to guage the effectiveness of the service, and the prospects for improvement are considerably enhanced when Black clients can be involved in a critical and constructive manner. The approach from the angle of the client would be to secure a better fit between his perceptual world and the real world of the agencies. It is an axiom of the counseling profession that the right to social services should not be subject to non-legal considerations; however, in a variety of instances the delivery of services is crippled by consideration of race, class and other personal and physical attributes. At the same time, the indignities inflicted upon Blacks by welfare service agencies might well serve a latent exclusionary function by discouraging those who might otherwise have availed themselves of these resources.[6]

As citizens of the community, poor Blacks are exercising their right to service. The relationship between the counselor and the client should reflect the community's sense of justice as well as its standards of fairness. However, despite a stance of ethical neutrality, the counselor is not immune from the stereotypes and fantasy notions concerning Blacks which are current in the larger non-ghetto society. Lower-class Blacks are subjected to a bewildering array of stresses due to the paucity of their resources; in addition to this, a sense of powerlessness is engendered in these individuals because of their inability to engage in the proper management of their environment. In the attempt to provide adequate materials and services for Blacks, the counselor is discharging one of the essential functions of his role, that is, to enable the individual to live with less destructive stresses. In assembling those conditions which will allow them to attain their full potential as intentional and creative beings, major emphasis should be placed on the creation or removal of barriers to opportunities rather than the development of a "tyranny of services". One must also attend carefully to the danger that service delivery systems do not function primarily as a benefit for the service professionals and poor Blacks as a captive clientele have to be coerced into its use.

MORAL COMMUNITY: DEVIANCE AS AN ARTIFACT OF LOCALITY

The success of traditional counseling concepts and approaches as they are applied in the Black ghetto will depend on the extent that they take congnizance of locality, the situational context in

which choices are made and the subcommunal norms which frame interpersonal relationships.

In terms of locality, counselors have operated largely on the premises of earlier sociological models. These early studies in urban sociology indisputably demonstrated that the indices of social disorganization were differentially distributed across the areas that comprise large metropolitan centers.[7] Constrained by certain elements in their theory of urban communities, the sociologists working within this province did not attend to the problems of the role these areas play in the etiology of deviance. These scholars emphasized the disorganizational aspects of urban slum neighborhoods and focused their research on such factors as ethnicity, social class, opportunity structure and law enforcement. As a consequence, the distribution of various forms of deviancy was viewed as an artifact of social characteristics that were logically independent of locality.

These urban sociologists inferred from social statistics relating to crime, juvenile delinquency, divorce, alcoholism and suicide that such urban areas were disorganized. They failed to make the distinction between social disorganization on the one hand and the absence of organization, personal disorder and deviance on the other[8]. For example, the bulk of the literature on the lower-class Black family[9] suggests that the predominantly matriarchal Black family is a disintegrating institution and is primarily responsible for the pathological features and disorganization in lower-class Black life. However, Chastang,[10] Billingsly,[11]

and Tuck[12] have shown that not only are significant male models available to the children of such families but that 77% of Black families are headed by males and that Black fathers represent an untapped source of strength in lower-class communities. In the same frame, Valentine[13] has indicated that social statistics represent only one kind of data needed to describe and interpret cultural systems and that the analysis of such data is subject to several interpretations by virtue of the fact that a variety of cultural designs might underlie a given statistical pattern. A number of recent studies[14] have alerted us to the fact that Black ghetto areas have certain peculiarities of social organization endemic to those territories. These studies indicated that often the subterranean status system which mediates relations between the inhabitants of the ghetto is not isomorphic with the one utilized by the social scientist in his treatment of these areas. This suggests that certain positional variables such as age, sex, ethnicity and social class, which may be used to comprehend various stratification systems within the larger society, are often complemented by additional sets of conditions and distinctions in ghetto areas. As a result, the outside observer is likely to be a stranger within this social order.

In terms of its unique social order, Black neighborhoods of poverty can also be viewed as moral communities. The emergence of a moral community is rooted in the fact that Black central city neighborhoods are differentially subject to processes of isolation and ghettoization[15] which progressively removes its residents from

the opportunities and rewards extant in the larger society. A plethora of factors can be adjudged responsible for conditions of residential segregation. Among the more important are the historical and cultural background of the ghetto's residents, the institutions in the ghetto and the posture of the larger community regarding activities which are defined as favorable or inimical to its interest. Where these factors operate either singly or in concert to cast adrift a particular area from the normative controls of the wider community, the result is the development of a subcommunity with its own normative framework, common understandings, communicative devices, interpersonal network and social groupings.

The condition of ghetto encapsulation also eventuates in an extraordinary exposure of Black ghetto residents to each other and a conjoint lack of exposure to non-ghetto residents. In addition to this, residential segregation creates a situation of low information flow from the Black ghetto to surburban areas. Most of the information about the Black ghetto, especially those in the news media, tends to be discrediting, such as drug abuse, welfare fraud and crimes against the person and property, creating moral panics among the public. From this emerges a view of the Black ghetto as a dangerous place; Black ghetto residents by virtue of their residence are <u>a priori</u> defined as dangerous and untrustworthy persons.[16] Consequently, in their transactions with the outside world, area residence becomes a pivotal identification category. Black ghetto residents find that merchants and vendors will not

deliver goods to their addresses; check-cashing activities and the establishment of credit in commercial institutions become degradation rituals which tend to confirm their minimal worth as persons in the eyes of the larger society.

The acceptance of these public stereotypes, in addition to the visible evidence which the ghetto daily provides, creates suspicion and distrust even among Black ghetto dwellers themselves. This militates against the development of basis of trust which are imperative in the structuring of a viable community. Nevertheless, in order to maintain orderly relations, black ghetto dwellers must construct a common set of symbols and understandings which allow for the evaluation and prediction of each others' behavior.

In a counseling context, the argument which impinges logically upon these assertions is that it is inappropriate to apply clinical models based on individual deviations from a cultural norm to members of a subculture with dissimilar values and life experiences.[17] The appropriate posture for the counselor would be first to discern the moral order of the ghetto and its supportive values and institutions, and secondly, to develop an appreciation for the significance of those factors in the lives of the residents who regard them as real. In order to understand how the person makes sense of his experience, the counselor must attempt to look into the world as it presents itself to the lower-class Black and encounter the principles governing that world.[18] This perspective is difficult to attain. The counselor and Black client represent different communities

of experience.[19] Consequently, words and concepts used by clients are not based on common experiential referents, creating problems of communication. The Counselor, who is usually reared in a middle-class environment, possesses no internalized knowledge of Black ghetto culture.[20] His knowledge, even where valid, is obtained primarily from the library rather than the streets. The latter can only be acquired from living and working in Black neighborhoods of poverty.[21] Only then can the counselor be fully alive to the affective component of the Black client's reality.

COMMUNITY AS A COMMONALITY OF INTERESTS

Lower-class Blacks experience frustration and deprivation in the areas of social acceptance, family relations, personal security and material possessions. The attitudes and values which they display represent efforts to come to terms with their economic and social marginality, but they are not normative in the sense that such behaviors are prescribed and made obligatory in specific ghetto areas. Conventional norms are recognized, but the resources for actualizing these roles are lacking. Subsequently, middle class norms lose their regulative force. They are either abandoned or held simultaneously with the more adaptive ghetto norms.[22]

The social pathologies which appear on a patterned group basis within the Black lower-class contribute significantly to their depressed economic condition. Black lower-class persons do aspire to social and economic mobility. Nevertheless, many of the problems of the Black lower-class stem from the fact that they face an economic

structure in which unskilled jobs are rapidly disappearing, thus denying them a foothold on the ladder to upward social mobility.[23] Furthermore, the jobs which are available can hardly sustain the individual and family. The problem is so acute that in terms of present market conditions, lower-class Blacks have been described as economically useless.[24] This raises the ethical question of how should this society respond to those segments of the population whom the economy can no longer absorb.

Low income Blacks are fully cognizant of how little the society values them, and the rejection which is implied in their location at the lower end of the occupational and social scale. Repeated failures have also forced upon them the realization that even the most efficient deployment of their meager resources places the goals of conventional society beyond their reach. The major response to this condition is that of "colonialization"[25] in which the ghetto provides the materials and limits of their social world. A second reaction is to reject the rejectors: the values and the style of the larger society. Lower-class Blacks seek to construct a valid identity and obtain status and self-esteem within their own marginal groups and their own ghetto community. The values and behavior routines which are endemic to the Black ghetto provide the inhabitants with a design for living and a set of solutions to everyday problems. They are situational adaptations in the same manner that the values and behaviors of the middle class represent adaptations to their existential situation.[26] But in terms of functioning in the larger society, it is an adaptation to a fundamentally maladaptive way of life.

The counselor must take full cognizance of these non-change factors and attitudes in the design of intervention strategies which are aimed at changing behaviors and inculcating industrial discipline. Stipended job training programs constitute the major intervention strategy for the Black poor. A variety of problems attend these efforts. Given the nature of the economy, job training has little or no relationship to rates of unemployment which are primarily structural in nature. At the same time, the dead-end and menial jobs from which poor Blacks are in retreat are precisely the class of jobs which are held out as enticement in these programs. In our techno-bureaucratic society, a person is virtually what he does.[27] However, these low status jobs are so devoid of creative possibilities as to raise serious questions whether the occupants can even achieve a valid self-identity within them. Such programs function to divert attention from causative conditions.

Attempts to correct supposed deficiencies in the employment potential of the Black ghetto dweller falls to an additional set of social and structural factors. The alienation of the Black lower-class from conventional standards also involves an alienation from the world of work and the values which undergird it. Work is not a central life experience for many of the young men and women in the Black lower-class who are still enmeshed in peer group activities. In these groups many of the behaviors which are positively valued are inimical to the adoption of conventional work habits.

Many training programs do contain built-in disincentives to work. In these programs the stipends cannot adequately maintain a

family and are usually subtracted from welfare payments. Furthermore, job placement represents the weakest aspect of these programs. If the individual is laid off from his job, which is a common occurrence--since these low-level entry jobs are very sensitive to economic changes--the former welfare recipient faces a formidable process in his re-entry to the welfare roll. Furthermore, the participants are aware of these inconsistencies.[28] Factors such as these further militate against the success of training programs. It follows that the life changes of Black ghetto residents will not be improved substantially unless work is created which provides for security and a living wage while allowing them status and dignity in the performance of their functions.

In the present circumstance, the world of welfare assistance with its regular checks, devoid of risk and failure, might represent a much more attractive alternative than the uncertainty of the job world. In the same vein, Fernan[29] has indicated that unemployment status has certain unintended consequences for the lower-class male. In the first instance, the individual is freed from the responsibility of family and child support payments and also the demands of creditors and garnishment threats. Secondly, because of the reliability of the bi-monthly check and food stamps, ghetto landlords and merchants find it more profitable to deal with welfare recipients. These practices function to give institutional support to the welfare system and demonstrates that the deprivation of the ghetto is functionally interlocked with the economic sector of the larger society. The deficiencies and near collapse of the welfare system has been documented elsewhere, suffice to say that the system

barely provides minimal supports which cannot be translated into actual improvements in family circumstances and life style.

Intervention strategies must also take into account the lack of efficacy with which the Black lower class person confronts his world. The social world of the lower income person is taken as given and not amenable to change or individual initiative. He cannot defend his community against the incursions of custodially oriented bureaucracies nor can he affect in a favorable fashion the resource utilization of his neighborhood. He belongs to what Suttles has called "the defeated community".[30] His extraordinary exposure to individuals in a similar condition and a lack of exposure to the outside community only reinforces his own view of the ghetto society and his own future; not only are his efforts felt to be useless, but the individual himself is felt to be irrelevant. The development of a psychological readiness for failure blunts the pain of discrimination and rejection but it reduces the individual's capacity to invest in long term solutions.[31]

In the view of the larger society, alienation and dependency are the root causes of his plight. Within this frame, disadvantageness is viewed as personal disability, and the onus of failure is placed upon the Black ghetto deweller with little thought given to current socio-economic arrangements and the structure of cumulative discriminatory disadvantages. The Black lower-class are not encouraged to view their condition and futures in terms of a commonality of interests, to formulate their common plight into legitimate grievances against existing institutional arrangements and their ideological assumptions. As a result of this neglect, Black lower-class

areas rarely become politically engaged communities and group action which animates a variety of other publics is effectively foreclosed to the Black lower-class or where it occurs, it is not viewed as legitimate.

Social scientists rarely act on the primary causes of social problems. Their intervention is usually at a tertiary level. Professionally, they are dealing with the symptoms of institutional dysfunction, inadequate medical services, poor housing, poor schools, unemployment and underemployment.[32] These effects fall disproportionately on the poor ghetto dweller who is the least prepared to deal with them. The daily struggle for survival exacts a heavy lien on already impoverished personal resources. Given this reality, it is not difficult to see why the Black poor are not easily persuaded that the commitment of scarce resources to future goals at the expense of immediate survival needs is a rational alternative. Nevertheless, to attack social problems in their broadest sense, the problems must be defined in institutional rather than individual terms. Within this frame, the counselor must assume the role of an ally rather than a therapist vis-a-vis those victimized by the system; only then can he hope to effect real change. This involves a radically altered perspective in which the Black poor are not described in psychiatrically derived vocabularies but in terms of those social/structural constraints which are the true locus of their failure. The implications and consequences of this frame of action for the counseling profession has not been fully drawn.

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